

CHAPTER ONE

Why Political Trust Matters

Government cannot solve our problems, it cannot set our goals, it cannot define our vision. Government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy. And government cannot mandate goodness.

—Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, 1978

Government is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem. —Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, 1981

The era of big government is over.

—Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, 1995

SINCE THE LATE 1960s and especially since Watergate, not even those who head the federal government have had much good to say about it. Democrats like Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton expressed very little confidence in government, while Republicans like Ronald Reagan expressed outright contempt. Without doubt, their rhetoric reflects the public's antipathy toward government, but it also guarantees that such antipathy will continue. While scholars and commentators have focused considerable attention on declining political trust, they have focused much less on if, why, and in what concrete ways the decline matters. In fact, declining political trust has had such profound effects on American politics that, in many ways, it has defined American political landscape over the last several decades.

Political candidates have capitalized on this distrust, even catapulting themselves into the White House with it. In September 2000, George W. Bush's campaign was in terrible shape. Al Gore emerged from the Democratic convention like a house afire. His vice presidential selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman, a pro-business Democrat and the first Jewish candidate for national office, won high praise. The party successfully reengaged key elements of the Democratic coalition, namely women, union members, and racial minorities. And, perhaps most importantly, Gore finally seemed to find his voice during his well-received acceptance speech. Whereas Gore had consistently trailed Bush by up to 15 points in public opinion polls in the days before the Democratic convention, he roared out of it leading by 10.

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While Gore was catching fire, Bush was losing it. The perception that Bush was intellectually lazy at best and not smart enough to be president at worst started to take its toll. Each campaign stop seemingly brought another gaffe, whether it was confusing billions with trillions in explaining how he would spend the budget surplus, or getting caught by a live microphone using vulgar language to describe *New York Times* reporter Adam Clymer.

Bush's campaign operatives were not doing much better. During the second week in September, the press hammered the campaign for allegedly inserting a subliminal message into a television advertisement. In what would become known as the "Rats" ad, the word "bureaucrats" tumbled from the top of the screen to the bottom, and, for less than a half second, the word "Rats" was frozen in the bottom corner. Democratic political operatives had a field day charging the Bush team with unethical conduct. Worse yet, at a press event in Milwaukee where Bush attempted to put the "Rats" flap behind him, he repeatedly mispronounced *subliminal* as "subliminable," casting further doubt on his intelligence.

By early October, however, Bush had righted the ship. By doing better than expected in the first presidential debate on October 3, Bush convinced many Americans that he belonged on the same stage as Gore. Indeed, according to data collected by political scientist James Stimson, Bush led Gore in the polls every day but one from October 5 through Election Day.¹

In addition to marking a decisive turn in the polls, October 5 is significant for another reason. It was the day that the Bush campaign debuted a very effective political advertisement. In this 60-second spot, Bush in effect made the claim that huge philosophical differences distinguished him from Gore. Bush's tagline summed up the contrast: "He [Al Gore] trusts government. I trust you." The campaign hierarchy judged the ad so effective that they ran it in each of the battleground states for the duration of the campaign and inserted the charge in numerous other ads that ran in the campaign's final month. In addition, Bush used this turn of phrase in all three presidential debates, and he made it a regular feature of his stump speech as well.²

Bush's tagging of Gore with the government was effective because so few people trust it. In 2000, 60 percent of Americans trusted the government to do what was right only "some of the time" or "never"; 60 percent thought it wasted "a lot" of money. Nearly twice as many thought it was run for a few big interests looking out for themselves as thought it was run for the benefit of all Americans.³ In short, people viewed the government as unethical, inefficient, wasteful, and unrepresentative. In this environment, Bush could increase his support by framing people's choice for

president as one between someone who trusts the people and someone who trusts the government.

Recent history supports running a presidential campaign against Washington. Since 1968, being identified with Washington has become political poison. The incumbent party has won only four of the last nine presidential elections, the worst showing for the ins since the days of Andrew Jackson. The only successful nonincumbent presidential candidate with recent Washington ties was George H. W. Bush, and he benefited handsomely from his opponent, Michael Dukakis, running perhaps the worst campaign of the last half-century.⁴ Vice presidents and former vice presidents such as Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, and Al Gore have been consistent losers, and senators like George McGovern and Bob Dole have fared no better. Indeed, prior to Bush in 1988, the last federal officeholder to win the White House was Senator John F. Kennedy in 1960.⁵ In contrast to much of American political history, it helps to be a former governor these days, as were Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. When it comes to choosing a president, Americans' lack of trust in the federal government in a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate political culture matters profoundly.

POLITICAL TRUST AND PUBLIC POLICY

Even more importantly, declining political trust has played the central role in the demise of progressive public policy in the United States over the last several decades. My claim defies the conventional wisdom. In explaining why public policy has grown more conservative since the 1960s, pundits and political scientists alike tend to identify a conservative turn in public opinion as the cause. However, little evidence exists to support this explanation. There remains constant and widespread support for big government in areas where most Americans benefit. For example, almost everyone wants to maintain or increase investment in the vast majority of federal programs, such as Medicare, Social Security, education, highways, environmental protection, and the like. Had public opinion truly grown more conservative, support for these initiatives would have decreased because conservatives have a philosophical aversion to government.

Contemporary political rhetoric fuels this misunderstanding. By railing against “big government” in general, conservative and moderate politicians imply that people want less government across the board. However, public opposition to government is focused entirely on programs that require political majorities to make sacrifices for political minorities, such as antipoverty and race-targeted initiatives. In short, Americans continue to

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support big government when they benefit from it, but they want limited government when they are asked to make sacrifices.

The massive deterioration in political trust that has occurred since the 1960s explains this disjuncture. Declining trust should not affect support for all things that government does. Indeed, people do not need to trust the government much when they benefit from it. Instead, people need to trust the government when they pay the costs but do not receive the benefits, which is exactly what antipoverty and race-targeted programs require of most Americans. When government programs require people to make sacrifices, they need to trust that the result will be a better future for everyone. Absent that trust, people will deem such sacrifices as unfair, even punitive, and, thus, will not support the programs that require them.

Judging by their anti-Washington media campaigns, politicians understand the power of political distrust. They have learned that among the surest ways to rally public opposition to a proposed government-sponsored initiative is to remind ordinary Americans that the federal government will be involved. This tactic proved effective during the health care reform debate of the early 1990s. When Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992, he promised to provide health insurance to all Americans, including the more than 30 million uninsured. With so many already lacking insurance and tens of millions of others struggling to afford it, the issue seemed electorally promising. Indeed, the top of Clinton's campaign hierarchy, James Carville and Paul Begala, knew its potential first hand. They had run Harris Wofford's (D-Pa.) successful U.S. Senate bid to fill John Heinz's seat after his untimely death in 1991. Although no one gave the politically obscure Wofford, the Pennsylvania labor secretary and former Bryn Mawr College president, much of a chance, he erased a 55-point deficit in the polls to defeat former two term Pennsylvania governor and sitting U.S. attorney general, Dick Thornburgh. Most observers believe Wofford won largely on the strength of his health care reform promise. In 1992, a relatively obscure Arkansas governor, Bill Clinton, enjoyed similar success.

Things changed markedly for Clinton over the next two years as he attempted to move health care reform from campaign promise to law. Although the secret meetings of the Health Care Task Force, the complexity of the final proposal, and the negative feelings that most Americans had about Hillary Clinton, the Task Force's leader, damaged the reform effort (see Johnson and Broder 1996; Skocpol 1996), the biggest problem was Americans' negative feelings toward government. At the time, only about 20 percent of Americans thought they could trust the government in Washington to do what was right "just about always" or even "most of the time," the lowest reading since polling organizations started asking the question in the 1950s. Moreover, 75 percent thought the government was run for a few big interests looking out for themselves. Such an opinion environment

makes it extraordinarily difficult for leaders to marshal support for a large federally administered program that might require many people to make sacrifices for others. Most Americans simply do not think government is capable of doing the job well enough or fairly enough to help the less well off at the same time it protects the interests of the better off.⁶

Things used to be much different. When political trust was high in the 1960s, John F. Kennedy promised Americans a New Frontier, and Lyndon Johnson promised a Great Society. Both trumpeted programs designed to aid historically discriminated-against groups and those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. With political trust today in much lower reserve, only the most resolute liberals even talk much about race and poverty, much less enact new policies to confront these problems.⁷ Instead, most left-of-center politicians search for a “third way” by splitting the difference between conservative and liberal ideas. They try to avoid using racial terms or making references to racialized programs, such as welfare and food stamps (Gilens 1999).

Centrists like Clinton and Gore have replaced liberals like Kennedy and Johnson because most Americans, whether conservative or liberal, do not trust the delivery system for most progressive public policy. Even if people support progressive policy goals, they do not support the policies themselves because they do not believe that the government is capable of bringing about desired outcomes. While almost all Americans would like to eradicate poverty and racial discrimination, most simply do not think the federal government is up to the task. As evidence, a 1995 poll by the *Washington Post*, Harvard University, and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that among those who were not willing to have “the federal government spend more to help low-income minorities,” fully 59 percent said their opposition was based on the belief that “the federal government [could] not do the job right.” In contrast, only 25 percent voiced a principled objection to spending in this policy area.⁸ Given such a dim view of the government’s ability to solve problems, it should be no surprise that Republicans have dominated the last 35 years in American politics, which has been mostly characterized by low levels of public trust in government.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is about the importance of political trust, a concept that has caused a great deal of scholarly debate about both its definition and its measurement. In chapter 2, I define political trust and detail scholarly concerns about its measurement. I review the scholarly and political explanations for fluctuations in political trust over time, and augment this understanding of why trust changes using a priming-based theory based on

post–September 11 data. Next, I track the pattern of trust’s decay since the 1960s, and discuss the theoretical and normative importance of a lack of political trust in a democratic society.

I argue that declining political trust explains why the center in American politics has shifted to the right in recent decades. Although increasing conservatism is an alternative explanation, I demonstrate in chapter 3 that conservatism, by any number of measures, has remained constant. It, therefore, cannot explain why the policy agenda has become so much more conservative over this same period. Only increasing political distrust can. In this chapter, I detail an individual-level theory about the importance of political trust in generating support for programs that require either perceived sacrifice or entail some perceived risk, exactly the types of programs that have seen a deterioration in public support over time. In addition, I show that, in the aggregate, the pattern of policy liberalism implemented by the federal government follows the pattern of political trust over time. When the public is more trustful, the government responds with more liberal public policy, and when the public is more distrustful, the government responds with more conservative public policy. I also demonstrate that political trust is a more compelling aggregate-level explanation for variation in policy liberalism than other competing factors, most notably policy mood.

Chapter 4 details the changing causal dynamic between political trust at the individual level and support for specific public policies. My work challenges the scholarly conventional wisdom about the causal importance of trust. Most scholars have treated political trust as a dependent variable (e.g. Citrin 1974; Miller 1974a, 1974b), attempting to explain why it changes. While I demonstrate that this approach was appropriate in the 1970s, the contemporary information environment has transformed political trust into a potent causal force.

The next three chapters provide individual-level evidence that declining political trust undermines support for a range of progressive public policies. In chapter 5, I demonstrate that political trust helps bridge the divide in public opinion between distributive and redistributive issues. Americans have always been more supportive of spending for programs that benefit them directly, such as spending on highways, than programs for which most make sacrifices, such as spending on welfare or food stamps (Free and Cantril 1967). In fact, this gap has grown larger over the last 30 years. The reason is the decline in political trust. While support for distributive spending has remained constant, support for redistributive spending has ebbed and flowed with increases and decreases in political trust. My theory suggests that trust should be influential only when a program requires sacrifice or risk, which are both characteristics of redistributive spending.

Chapter 6 extends the theory to include racial policy. For whites, race-targeted policies require at least perceived sacrifices for a somewhat intangible outcome, greater racial equality. Hence whites should need to trust the government to support race-targeted programs. In fact, I demonstrate that this is the case. The results in this chapter have strong normative implications as well. Why do white Americans support racial equality in principle but not the programs designed to make equality a reality? The main reason is that they do not trust the government to administer race-targeted programs either well or fairly.

In chapter 7, I demonstrate political trust's importance in understanding the failure of the Clinton health care reform plan and the administration's subsequent turn to the right. While opponents attacked the plan in several different ways, I show that antigovernment appeals were decisive in explaining its defeat. Although trust in government had no bearing on support either before or after 1994, opponents made it a critically important component in 1994 by framing the debate in terms of sacrifice and clumsy government bureaucracy. Since trust reached its survey era low during 1994, the politicization of trust defeated Clinton's last major effort to add to the nation's social safety net. In addition, I show that political trust played a major role in congressional voting decisions in 1994, but not in other years, helping to usher in a different kind of politics that has further marginalized progressive public policy.

Chapter 8 discusses the implications of the findings. That Americans are more distrustful today rather than more conservative has important implications for the behavior of political elites. For example, the post-1994 Clinton administration governed consistently to the right on most issues, apparently believing that a fundamental reordering of ideological preferences had occurred. But, ideology had not changed, and, indeed, the public's preference for government intervention actually increased toward the end of his presidency. If Clinton had realized that increasing political distrust was the source of his problem in 1994, he might have charted a much more progressive route through the rest of his administration.⁹

In addition, the concluding chapter discusses larger normative issues. Since political trust is necessary to generate support for redistributive and race-targeted policies, low levels of political trust have a particularly negative effect on those who rely most on government programs, specifically the economically disadvantaged and racial minorities. For government to provide them adequate representation, political trust cannot be in short supply. Otherwise, the haves will be unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to aid the have-nots.